

PARATEXTUALITY AND THE LOST URTEXT

Anthony Enns

The term “paratext” refers to the elements of a literary work that accompany the text but are not considered part of the text itself, such as title pages, introductions, annotations, appendices, etc. Gérard Genette famously described the paratext as the “threshold...between the inside and the outside” of a text, and this threshold represents “a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that...is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it” (2). In other words, the contextual information and critical commentary provided in the paratext ultimately serves the author’s own interests by ensuring that the text is interpreted correctly: “The way to get a proper reading is...to put the (definitely assumed) reader in possession of information the author considers necessary for this proper reading...[such as information] about the way the author wishes to be read” (209). Genette also noted that paratextual elements have expanded over time in order to satisfy “the educated public’s growing curiosity about the ‘making’ of the text and about the unearthing of versions the author had abandoned” (339). Paratexts were thus increasingly seen as necessary “supplements” or “accessories” to a literary work, and a text without a paratext is now viewed as “a power disabled...like an elephant without a mahout” (410).

If a text without a paratext is “an elephant without a mahout,” then a “paratext without its text is a mahout without an elephant,” which Genette dismissed as “a silly show” (410). This claim might appear to be commonsensical, as paratexts would seem to serve no purpose in the absence of the texts to which they refer, yet in recent years there has been a surprising number of literary works that consist solely of paratextual elements. Craig Dworkin is one of the few critics who have devoted serious attention to these works, and he argues that this new subgenre of experimental literature reflects a growing awareness on the part of readers of the critical functions of paratexts as well as a growing desire on the part of writers to assert more authorial control over their works. His approach thus focuses primarily on the relationship between form and content by examining how the use of paratextual elements serves to highlight key themes or issues in the works themselves. For example, Gérard Wajcman’s novel *L’interdit* (*The Forbidden*, 1986) consists of various footnotes to a missing biography, and this technique is designed to dramatize the main character’s sense of disorientation and confusion due to amnesia. Jennifer Martenson’s book *Xq28*¹ (2001)

similarly consists of footnotes to a non-existent study on the so-called “gay gene,” which is designed to highlight the lack of scientific knowledge about homosexuality as well as the marginalization of queer voices within this research field. Charles Finlay’s story “Footnotes” (2001) also provides a series of footnotes to an entirely redacted document about a mysterious catastrophic event about which either little is known or little has been made known to the public. In each of these examples, the exclusive use of paratextual elements thus serves to illustrate gaps in knowledge (or the suppression of knowledge), which is metaphorically represented by the absence of the primary urtext.

While Dworkin’s analysis of these texts is very convincing, the following essay will argue that the literary use of fictional paratexts can also be understood using concepts and theories developed by textual and bibliographic critics. Textual criticism is rarely discussed within the context of contemporary experimental literature due to its strong emphasis on authorial intention, which often appears somewhat old-fashioned or even obsolete. However, textual critics like Hans Zeller explicitly reject the notion that the role of the editor is to establish the most authoritative version of a literary work by insisting that each revision transforms a work into another form that has its own individual set of intentions. Peter Shillingsburg also argues that the reading of a literary work is the result of a complex set of interactions between the writer, the text, and the reader; instead of isolating a single, authoritative version of a work, editorial interventions thus represent “reception performances” that generate new interpretations. These theories are particularly relevant in the case of texts that consist solely of paratextual elements because these elements are rarely used to guide and control the interpretations of readers; rather, they are more often used to show how editors construct, transform, and potentially even disrupt literary texts through the act of assembling, organizing, and contextualizing the material. While editors often claim to be maintaining and preserving an authoritative version of a literary work—that is, a version that corresponds to the writer’s original intentions—the complications and contradictions that arise from their interventions actually reveal the inherent instability of textuality by demonstrating the impossibility of identifying and isolating such a version. The contemporary use of paratext as text thus represents a sustained attempt to negotiate the inherent difficulty of defining the limits, borders, or thresholds of literary works, as the distinction between inside and outside is repeatedly shown to be difficult—if not impossible—to ascertain, and this rejection of the concept of an authoritative or ideal work is most clearly illustrated by the absence of any urtext that is completely removed from editorial influence and manipulation.

Early textual critics like Walter W. Greg and Fredson Bowers believed that the goal of the editor was to ascertain which version of a given text was the most authoritative. When confronted with anomalies or variations, the editor was solely responsible for determining whether or not they originated from the writer and should be included in the final text:

[The choice between variations] will be determined partly by the opinion the editor may form respecting the nature of the copy from which each substantive edition was printed, which is a manner of external authority; partly by the intrinsic authority of the several texts as judged by the relative frequency of manifest errors therein; and partly by the editor's judgement of the intrinsic claims of individual readings to originality—in other words their intrinsic merit, so long as by “merit” we mean the likelihood of their being what the author wrote rather than their appeal to the individual taste of the editor. (29)

According to this theory (also known as the “Greg-Bowers copy-text theory”), a literary work was thus considered to be a representation of the writer's original intentions, and the task of the editor was to ensure that the text remains free of contamination by weeding out any errors or mistakes and incorporating all of the writer's later revisions. In other words, the editor was conceived as a kind of literary executor, whose purpose was to carry out the wishes of the deceased, yet Zeller points out that this goal is ultimately impossible, as it is often difficult to determine the original intentions of a writer and it is sometimes necessary to ignore them, such as when a writer requests that his/her works be destroyed. Rather than seeing the role of the editor as that of a literary executor, Zeller argues that editors are essentially historians who have a duty to history: “[T]he editor's philological task...can only be to interpret extant documents and accompanying circumstances as historic facts. In my opinion he has to deal with the intentions of the author not as an executor, but only as a historian, and he should regard them not as binding directives for editorial decisions, but as historical phenomena” (243). Instead of developing a single, authoritative version of a work that reflects the writer's original intentions, the editor should thus assemble multiple versions of the work, each of which possesses its own historical value.

Shillingsburg argues that this approach represents “a slight shift...from considering the text as an established (or establishable) locus of authoritative stability to a concentration on text as process” (55-56), yet it does not go far enough because the identification of individual versions is highly subjective and requires the attribution of a similar kind of authority. In other words, Zeller simply replaces the authority of the text with the authority of the version, yet these versions do not necessarily reflect the intentions of the writer

at different times: “Versions are not facts to be discovered about works; they are, rather, concepts created and put there by readers as a means of ordering (or as justification for valuing) textual variants” (93). Shillingsburg thus concludes that the concepts of “work” and “version” both depend equally on interpretive acts performed by individual readers, and the role of the editor is not to determine the historical value of the various versions but rather to present readers with a range of options from which they can derive their own independent interpretations: “[T]he reader becomes the ‘functional authority’ for the Work and its Versions...[and] ideally the reader should have ready access to the evidence that would fully inform his or her decisions” (94). While Zeller and Shillingsburg both emphasize the importance of scholarly editions that foreground the different versions of a given work, Shillingsburg insists that the authority for interpreting these versions should remain in the hands of the reader and that the task of the editor is not to guide or control the reader’s interpretations but rather to provide material that will help the reader to develop and refine their interpretations. The meaning of a literary work is thus the result of choices made by individual readers, and each of these interpretations is unique because each person experiences a work differently.

Writers frequently employ paratextual elements to dramatize the impact of editing on the production and reception of literary texts, yet it is often unclear which concept of a work and which understanding of editorial labor is being promoted. In some cases, the purpose of these paratextual elements appears to be purely satirical, as the writer merely wishes to poke fun at various scholarly practices. For example, Robert Benchley’s story “Shakespeare Explained: Carrying on the System of Footnotes to a Silly Extreme” (1921) consists of ten footnotes to a non-existent scene from Shakespeare’s play *Pericles* (1609), in which a lady-in-waiting enters and asks, “Where is the music?” The footnotes provide an exorbitant amount of critical information, including alternate readings of particular words and references to other plays by Shakespeare in which these words are similarly employed. By incorporating such ridiculous and unnecessary commentary, the story clearly criticizes the idea that the editor is needed to inform the reader concerning the various possible interpretations of the text, and the implicit assumption is that Shakespeare’s play represents an authoritative text that can stand on its own without editorial intervention. This idea is made particularly explicit in the last line, where the anonymous editor summarizes the significance of the scene by summarizing Shakespeare’s own dialogue more or less verbatim: “The meaning of the whole passage seems to be that the First Lady-in-Waiting has entered...and says, ‘What ho! Where is the music?’” (179).

Benchley's use of footnotes to parody literary scholarship thus supports the Greg-Bowers copy-text theory by reinforcing the notion of a single, authoritative work and minimizing the role played by the editor in the construction of such a work.

A similar form of mock pedantry can be seen in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire* (1962), which presents an extended commentary by a fictional critic named Charles Kinbote on a poem by a fictional writer named John Shade, who died shortly before its completion. Kinbote thus sees himself as Shade's literary executor, as his goal is to assemble the numerous variants and fragments left behind into an authoritative text that reflects the deceased writer's original intentions. Through the use of various paratextual elements, including a foreword, annotations, and an index, however, Kinbote primarily disputes the claims of other critics and promotes his own highly idiosyncratic interpretation of the text. Early in his commentary, for example, he claims to have "deciphered" a reference to himself in a "disjointed, half-obliterated draft" of the poem: "Ah, I must not forget to say something / That my friend told me of a certain king" (54). This note establishes a recurring theme that continues throughout Kinbote's commentary, which is his persistent belief that the writer's original intention was to tell the story of the exiled king Charles Xavier of Zembla (whom the editor believes himself to be), despite the fact that there is no mention of this person within the poem itself. Although Kinbote acknowledges the conspicuous absence of this theme, and he even admits that his interpretation of the above-mentioned lines may have been "distorted and tainted by wistful thinking" (162), he ultimately attributes this absence to the influence of the writer's wife, Sybil: "Shade regularly read to Sybil cumulative parts of his poem [and] she made him tone down or remove from his Fair Copy everything connected with the magnificent Zemblan theme with which I kept furnishing him and which, without knowing much about the growing work, I fondly believed would become the main rich thread in its weave!" (66). Kinbote also claims that the traces of this history can still be seen in the alternate drafts and variants of the poem: "[T]he final text of *Pale Fire* has been deliberately and drastically drained of every trace of the material I contributed; but we also find that despite the control exercised upon my poet by a domestic censor and God knows whom else, he has given the royal fugitive a refuge in the vaults of the variants he has preserved" (59). One of these variants, for example, includes a reference to a "secret corridor," which Kinbote claims was "suggested by something Shade had from me" (85). In another variant, Shade left a blank in the text where a proper name should be, and Kinbote is convinced that the missing name is his own (120). Kin-

bote is thus a proponent of the Greg-Bowers copy-text theory, as he believes that a literary work should reflect the writer's original intentions and he believes that the goal of the editor is to ensure that the work remains free of contamination by incorporating revisions and weeding out mistakes.

The fact that Kinbote is clearly distorting the writer's original intentions by imposing his own (false) interpretation onto the text suggests that the novel represents another example of mock pedantry, yet Kinbote's commentary also contains numerous references to words and images that evoke highly personalized associations. For example, a reference to a kiss inspires Kinbote to compare his own childhood to that of the writer: "My own boyhood was too happy and healthy to contain anything remotely like the fainting fits experienced by Shade" (106). A connection drawn between youthful sexuality and railway trains also evokes memories of a homoerotic episode in Kinbote's own youth: "Who can forget the good-natured faces, glossy with sweat, of copper-chested railway workers leaning upon their spades and following with their eyes the windows of the great express cautiously gliding by?" (106). These associations appear to have nothing to do with literary scholarship, as they repeatedly emphasize the idea that every act of reading is an intensely personal experience. This idea is also illustrated by the index that Kinbote compiles for the text. Although the entries include references to specific line numbers in the poem, they almost exclusively refer to the absent subtext involving the history of the exiled king. The index also includes various references to Zemblan history that are not even discussed in Kinbote's commentary, such as "*Kobaltana*, a once fashionable mountain resort," which is "not in the text" (220). Instead of guiding or controlling the reader's interpretation, the index thus serves as a reminder that every act of reading is a unique performance, as the entries appear to belong to another work that exists only in the editor's own mind. While Nabokov's use of paratextual elements has frequently been interpreted as a critique of excessive and intrusive editorial interventions, as in Benchley's story, it is important to note that it also demonstrates how the interpretation of every text is influenced by intertextual references as well as personal associations that are external to the text itself. When seen from this perspective, Kinbote's habit of referring to Shade as "my poet" and to "Pale Fire" as "my poem" can be understood not simply as a sign of editorial megalomania, but rather as an indication that there is no single, authoritative work that reflects a writer's true intentions, but only an endless series of versions based on the interpretive acts of individual readers.

This idea was taken a step further in J. G. Ballard's story "The Index" (1977), which consists exclusively of paratextual elements. The story mainly

consists of the index to a fictional biography of a man named Henry Rhodes Hamilton, and it opens with a note from a fictional editor, who explains that this index is the only surviving fragment of “the unpublished and perhaps suppressed autobiography of a man who may well have been one of the most remarkable figures of the 20th century” (940). The editor also describes Hamilton as a “physician,” “philosopher,” a “man of action,” a “patron of the arts,” a “claimant to the English throne,” and the “founder of a new religion” (940), and the index then provides a comprehensive overview of his remarkable life, such as his meetings with Chiang Kai-shek (who adopts his land-reform proposals), Adolf Hitler (who divulges his Russian invasion plans), Winston Churchill (who is inspired by Hamilton to write his “iron curtain” speech), Albert Einstein (who makes a death-bed confession to Hamilton), the Dalai Lama (who supports Hamilton’s initiatives with Mao Tse-tung), Enrico Fermi (whom Hamilton diagnoses with cancer), and Ernest Hemingway (who portrays Hamilton in his novel *The Old Man and the Sea*). Hamilton is also present during some of the major historical events of the past century, as he participates in the D-Day attack on Juno beach, witnesses the atomic cloud over Hiroshima, observes the landings in Korea with General MacArthur, and is even rumored to have been present in Dealey Plaza at the time of John F. Kennedy’s assassination. While the index provides suggestive hints concerning the content of Hamilton’s missing autobiography, this content appears so exceptional that it practically verges on the absurd.

Dworkin argues that “a linear narrative” gradually “emerges from the list of headwords,” as these entries “tend to reference sequentially higher page numbers in the missing autobiography, which in turn appears to have been organized chronologically” (18-19). Near the end of the index, for example, Hamilton’s followers take over the United Nations and declare war on the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., and all of these events are listed under the letter “U.” Hamilton is then arrested by the British government and incarcerated on the Isle of Wight, which is listed under the letter “W,” and the final entry reports that the editor who prepared the index to his autobiography subsequently disappeared, which is listed under the letter “Z” because the editor’s last name was “Zielinski.” Dworkin thus concludes that the index provides a clear and concise summary of the missing urtext, as there is a direct correlation between the alphabetical order of headwords and the chronological sequence of events, yet this is not entirely accurate, as it is often difficult to arrange the previous events in chronological order. Another approach is to reorganize the entries according to page number, yet this method gives rise to various anomalies that cannot be resolved or explained. The autobiogra-

phy begins, for example, with the story of George V's affair with Alice Rosalind Hamilton, which is mentioned on page 7, and the birth of Alice's son Henry, which is mentioned on page 8. Alice's husband, Alexander Hamilton, suffers a severe depression following Henry's birth, yet his depression is only mentioned on page 6, which is prior to the actual affair. This anomaly presents the reader with several possible interpretations: 1) Hamilton has confused the sequence of events in his retelling of them, 2) Hamilton has chosen to recount the events out of order, 3) Zielinski has made a mistake in compiling the index, 4) the fictional editor (or possibly the typesetter) has simply included an incorrect page number, or 5) Ballard himself made an error while writing the story. A similar anomaly occurs when Hamilton visits Albert Schweitzer, who receives him on page 199, performs an organ solo on page 201, and discusses his quest for the historical Jesus on pages 203 to 211. These page numbers also correspond to Hamilton's meeting with Sigmund Freud, who receives him in London on page 198 and analyzes him on page 205. While it is conceivable that Hamilton could have briefly interrupted his conversation with Schweitzer to attend psychoanalytic sessions with Freud, or that Hamilton's mnemonic powers were so weak that he had some difficulty differentiating between these two conversations, the presence of these anomalies is so apparent that they seem to suggest a consistent strategy. On page 251, for example, Hamilton visits Mahatma Gandhi in prison, and on page 253 they discuss the Bhagavadgita, yet on the same page Hamilton is allegedly captured by insurgents in Cambodia. He then somehow manages to wash Gandhi's dhoti on page 254, to be denounced by Gandhi on page 256, and to observe the atomic cloud over Hiroshima on page 258 before escaping from his Cambodian captors on page 261. By providing only the most minimal hints of a narrative structure, Ballard's story thus makes it virtually impossible for the reader to determine the definitive sequence of events, which invites the reader to imagine other possible sequences by reorganizing the material into alternative versions.

Another question that arises is whether the lost autobiography is apocryphal. If Hamilton was nominated for the Nobel Prize six times and featured on the cover of *Time* magazine on five separate occasions, for example, how could every trace of his existence have been erased? The editor speculates that the autobiography might actually be about someone else: "Is the suppressed autobiography itself a *roman à clef*, in which the fictional hero exposes the secret identities of his historical contemporaries?" (940). Another possibility is that the work does not actually exist: "Perhaps the entire compilation is nothing more than a figment of the over-wrought imagination of some deranged lexicographer" (940). A third possibility is that the

story is true and that every record of Hamilton's existence has been successfully deleted: "[T]he index may be wholly genuine, and the only glimpse we have into a world hidden from us by a gigantic conspiracy, of which Henry Rhodes Hamilton is the greatest victim" (940). In other words, the work is nothing more than the abstract idea of the autobiography, which no longer exists and possibly never existed, while the text (the system of signs presented to the reader) conveys nothing more than the vaguest impression of what the work might have actually been. Like Nabokov, therefore, Ballard uses paratextual elements to draw the reader's attention to the various layers of textual mediation, and it illustrates the impossibility of identifying a single, authoritative version of a text, and the text only exists in the mind of the reader and is entirely dependent on the reader's own acts of interpretation. Every possible interpretation is merely one version of a lost urtext that remains inaccessible and might never have existed in the first place.

Paul Fournel's book *Banlieue (Suburbia)*, (1990) similarly presents the reader with the paratextual elements of a fictional autobiography, although in this case the list of elements is much more extensive, including a title page, a legal disclaimer, a copyright notice, an epigraph, a dedication, a note from the fictional publisher, a foreword allegedly written by *Marguerite Duras*, an introductory note by the author (a fictional version of Fournel himself), an afterword allegedly written by *François Caradec*, annotations and an educational supplement by Maurice Garin (a fictional Inspector of the Ministry of Education), an index, a list of errata, and a back-cover blurb. Fournel's book thus contains all of the elements that would typically surround a literary work, yet the work itself remains absent, as all of the remaining pages are blank.

The publisher's note reveals that there was a scandal surrounding the book's original publication ten years earlier, although the details of the scandal are not explained and the publisher promises that "the quality of this little novel, now that passions have subsided, has emerged ever more forcefully" (vi). The publisher's discussion of the scandal thus serves to arouse the reader's interest and make the work seem culturally relevant while at the same time guaranteeing its quality by asserting that the question of its literary value has now been settled: "We hope that this new edition will... bring to reader the tranquil certainty that beneath the transitory scandal eternal literature lay slumbering" (vi). Duras' foreword also explains that the central theme of the book is violence: "Here once again we find the gloomy and pitiless vision of the world that surrounds our city, in all its hatefulness and cruelty.... A new violence, inscribed in thunderstruck words, here becomes definitive and monumental" (vii). Duras thus identifies two different

forms of violence in the book: physical violence, which is a manifestation of the “hatefulness and cruelty” of the inhabitants of the Parisian suburbs, and discursive violence, which is “inscribed in thunderstruck words.” She also explains that the scandal surrounding the book’s original publication was the result of a lawsuit filed by “hypocrites,” who were afraid of “reading what is true,” yet they ultimately failed to suppress this truth, as the book is now once again being exposed to “the light of day” (vii). Duras thus seems to suggest a possible parallel between the content of the book, which concerns the physical attacks that the writer sustained while growing up in the suburbs, and the scandal, which concerns the legal attacks that he sustained following the book’s publication. The writer’s introduction similarly notes that the book describes various beatings he received as a young man, yet because of its placement immediately following the foreword it is unclear whether the opening sentence, “they sure kicked me around” (viii), refers to physical assaults from neighbors or verbal assaults from critics. *Caradec’s* afterword finally reveals that the scandal surrounding the book’s publication involved an accusation by television commentator Bernard Pivot that Fournel had hired a ghost writer to finish the book. The Inspector of the Ministry of Education then “swore that he would vindicate Fournel” (9), and this new critical edition represents his attempt at such a vindication.

If the paratext functions as a metaphorical suburb that marks the threshold between the inside and the outside or the centre and the periphery of the text, then it is also a space of violence, as the various paratextual elements explicitly attempt to “fight back” against the critics who attacked the book when it was first published. The paratextual elements can thus be understood, in Dworkin’s sense, as a liminal space where the people who inhabit the margins of society struggle to resist the power of the dominant group. However, this interpretation seems to be contradicted by Garin’s annotations, which do not emphasize the creativity and originality of Fournel’s book but rather assert that “a rereading of *Suburbia*...debunks Pivot’s pathetic argument that only a ghost writer is capable of inserting spoonerisms in a novel” (9). In other words, Garin is not necessarily coming to Fournel’s defense by arguing that his book is too good to have been written by a ghost writer; rather, he appears to be sabotaging Fournel’s reputation even more thoroughly by arguing that he was perfectly capable of writing a bad book on his own. This theme is emphasized throughout his annotations, which repeatedly express his disdain for the suburbs and their inhabitants—a disdain that the implied reader presumably shares. In one note, for example, Garin attempts to explain Fournel’s use of “backslang” and “immigrant jargon” (2), which serves to highlight the low-class setting of the narrative as

well as the reader's distance from that setting. The annotations also include questions "for use in schools," which invite students to "transpose" passages from the book "into normal English" (2) or ask them to speculate as to whether the "violent eroticism" of the book is "gratuitous" (5), thus once again promoting a form of literary snobbery by encouraging readers to look down on the text and its writer.

This sense of elite superiority is even more apparent in the educational supplement that follows the afterword, which reports (inaccurately) that Fournel was born in the suburb of Les Lilas in 1957 (he was actually born in the city of Saint-Étienne in 1947) and that he still remains "imprisoned" in the suburbs, which is not "the place of choice of the writing profession" (10). Garin also notes that Fournel quit writing for ten years following the scandal surrounding the book, which suggests that he is not "a committed writer" (11). Garin then presents a series of discussion questions, which are even more overt in their condemnation of the book and its writer, such as "would you describe the text of this book as 'well written'?" and "was the book worth all the fuss that was made over it?" (11). The implicit answer to both of these questions is "no," which encourages readers to dismiss the notion that the book has any literary value whatsoever. Unlike Pivot, who sought to raise doubts about Fournel's talent by questioning the authorship of the book, Garin thus sought to confirm his lack of talent by performing a close reading of the text, yet despite this difference both of these critics clearly set out to undermine the positive revaluation of the book promoted in the foreword and afterword.

Garin seems to have the last word in this critical dispute, as his educational supplement is placed after *Caradec's* afterword, yet the list of errata that follows the supplement reveals some shocking mistakes in his annotations. Not only does Garin consistently confuse the identities of the two main characters, Robert and Norbert, but he also includes several incorrect literary references (citing Jean Racine's *Phèdre* instead of Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid*) and typos (writing "clockwise orange" instead of "clockwork orange" in a reference to Anthony Burgess' 1962 novel of that name). The list of errata thus introduces another layer of ambiguity: while Garin's annotations attempt to guide and control the reader's interpretation of the book by reinforcing cultural stereotypes and promoting a form of literary snobbery, the errata seem to undermine the legitimacy of his claims by calling into question his critical and intellectual credentials. The apparent inconsistencies between the foreword, afterword, annotations, and supplement thus present the reader with three possible interpretations: 1) the book is a work of "eternal literature" written by a young, talented writer who never received

the credit he deserved, 2) the book is a scam perpetrated by a juvenile delinquent who did not write it himself, or 3) the book is a vulgar, derivative, and poorly written memoir produced by a mediocre writer who was not deserving of the little attention he received and should rightly be forgotten. And while each of these interpretations is supposedly based on aesthetic principles—principles that allegedly determine whether a text is relevant or irrelevant—they more often seem to be based on the cultural assumptions of individual critics—assumptions concerning the appropriateness of the topic or the background of the writer. The fact that these interpretations are imposed externally onto the text is further emphasized by the absence of the original urtext, as readers are similarly forced to draw conclusions about the book without actually reading it. More than simply an example of mock pedantry, then, Fournel's book also challenges the notion of a single, authoritative version of a text and argues instead for the existence of multiple versions that are generated by individual acts of reading.

In his analysis of the book, Dworkin focuses on the metaphorical implications of its form: "The vacant pages of the fictional (fiction) *Suburbia* are indeed an accurate representation of one of the stereotypical accounts of postwar 'suburbia': a social space that is vacuous, uniform, and devoid of narrative interest" (20). In other words, Dworkin concludes that the lost urtext symbolizes suburbia itself because it remains a space of marginalized and exiled communities that are deprived of a voice. However, this reading is contradicted by the book's epigraph, which draws a direct connection between the use of paratextual elements and the organization of urban space by defining a "suburb" as "an outlying part" (iii). If the material surrounding the lost urtext is more properly understood as a metaphorical representation of suburban space, then the significance of suburban violence also becomes more readily apparent, as the paratext is essentially an arena of conflict where critics dispute the correct interpretation of the book and force it to conform to their own literary standards and expectations. Readers are also implicated in this discursive violence, as the paratext encourages them to draw their own conclusions through contextualizing information, critical commentary, and provocative questions, yet any conclusion must necessarily be imposed onto the work, as the urtext remains absent. Instead of serving the interests of the writer by guiding and controlling the reader's interpretation of the text and ensuring that it is read properly, as Genette argues, the paratextual elements in Fournel's book thus work against the writer's interests by allowing for multiple interpretations that have little—and perhaps even nothing—to do with the text itself.

Mark Dunn's *Ibid.: A Life* (2004) similarly consists solely of paratextual elements, and it also begins with a fictional note from the publisher, Pat

Walsh (Dunn's real-life editor), who introduces it as the only surviving fragment of a biography of a man named Jonathan Blashette, which was accidentally dropped into a bathtub by Walsh's three-year-old son (3). In order to compensate Dunn for the loss of the manuscript, Walsh offered to publish the endnotes by themselves. Dunn debated whether or not to accept this offer, as the endnotes were a poor substitute for the missing text: "These notes, while extensive, are still, by definition, subordinate to the lost text. . . . While the notes illuminate the dusty, crepuscular corners of this man's life, they tell its story only through sidebar and discursion. The book, therefore, becomes a biography by inference" (5). Dunn adds, however, that these notes also allowed him to explore the history of various marginal figures in Blashette's life, many of whom played only a slight role in the biography: "Publishing these notes by themselves allows me the opportunity to examine the role that each played in the man's life, in ways that I could not in the original text. There is a certain freedom here—stitching as I am upon the fringes of that life the kind of colorful piping that usually defines the whole garment" (5-6). Like Ballard's story, therefore, Dunn's novel provides a series of hints or clues concerning the content of a missing biography, and it invites readers to assemble these clues into a rough approximation of the lost urtext through inference and extrapolation, although it ultimately remains unclear whether such an approximation is even possible.

Like Hamilton, Blashette also appears to have led a remarkable life. For example, the notes to his biography suggest that he was an intimate acquaintance of numerous celebrities and historical figures, including Rudolph Valentino, James Joyce, Christian Dior, Betty Ford, Lester Young, Leni Riefenstahl, Woody Guthrie, T. E. Lawrence, E. M. Forster, Alfred C. Kinsey, and Dylan Thomas (who died after going drinking with Blashette). Blashette was also present at a number of significant historical events, as he fought in World War I (an experience that inspired him to venture into the deodorant business), he attended the Scopes "Monkey" Trial in 1925, his company nearly collapsed in the stock market crash of 1929, and he even participated in the Bonus March on Washington in 1932. Organizing these events into a coherent narrative is much like putting together a jigsaw puzzle, and it is therefore no coincidence that puzzles appear frequently throughout Dunn's notes. Blashette was reportedly a huge fan of these puzzles, and he even brought one with him during his military service, which earned him the nickname "Jigsaw Jugglehead" (92). Blashette also befriended puzzle designer named Jo LeGood (136), and in his last diary entry, written shortly before his death, he described himself as a piece in a vast puzzle:

There is no one great man. Only millions of men and women in possession of tiny pieces of greatness, which when put together, when assembled in the aggregate make the whole. I am a piece of a very large jigsaw puzzle. One of the corner pieces. The one you go for first—important for a time, different from most of the others. But then, in the end, in the big picture, just one of many. (265)

The image of the jigsaw puzzle thus provides an ideal metaphor for the lost urtext, which can only be reassembled by sifting and sorting through a massive conglomeration of isolated fragments. This passage also encapsulates the structure of the novel itself by referring to Blashette as a corner piece in a vast mosaic composed of many other characters, many of whom play only marginal roles in his life. The endnotes resemble puzzle pieces, in other words, because Blashette himself is only one small component in a much larger picture and his life story only emerges through the stories of the other characters.

The question remains, however, whether it is possible to reassemble these fragments into a single, coherent narrative. Like Kinbote, for example, Dunn frequently attacks the claims made by other biographers, and he attempts to offer a new version of Blashette's life story that contradicts previous accounts. Dunn is particularly critical of a biography by Cordell Glover, which he calls "monumentally flawed, indolently under-researched, and offensively over-embroidered" (32). Dunn notes several inaccuracies in Glover's text, such as the day when showman Thaddeus Grund arrived at the train station to take Blashette to the circus. Glover described the scene as follows: "*The train was late. Oh it was late all right, and everybody knew it. The crowd that had gathered at the station shifted from leg to leg, in one great concerted sway of impatience, like an enormous beast with many heads and twice as many legs hungry—hungry for what?—the beast only knew this: that a banquet awaited one of their number*" (33). Dunn's account is entirely different: "The train, in fact, wasn't late. It was on time. And no one had gathered on the platform but Addicus and his farmhand Bill Boils" (34). Dunn also criticizes Glover's account of Blashette's relationship with Kissy Valentine. Glover quickly summarizes the relationship as follows: "*Jonathan briefly dated a woman named Kissy Valentine who he said reminded him of his former girlfriend Great Jane [but] Kissy and Jonathan subsequently found themselves incompatible and parted as friends*" (118). According to Dunn, Glover's account is "based solely on conjecture" (117) and "makes no mention of the fact that the incompatibility has much to do with the fact that Kissy Valentine was, in actuality, Wade Kissman, a transvestite" (118). These disagreements complicate the reader's attempts to construct a coherent narrative by raising the possibility that Dunn's version of Blashette's biography

is only one of many potential versions and that it could be based on his own idiosyncratic interpretations of the historical material.

In some cases, Dunn's notes also present contradictory historical accounts, in which there is a lack of evidence to indicate the correct or authoritative sequence of events. When Blashette's grandfather dies at the beginning of the novel, for example, a note reports several conflicting accounts of his dying words:

According to Strother Bump: "I suppose, my dear children, that these comprise my last words on this beautiful planet.... No. Perhaps not.... These then.... No. Wrong again.... Maybe I should just lie here and be quiet. Breathing is difficult as it is.... And yet you're all looking at me as if you want me to say something profound.... Oh hello, Overta. I didn't see you there. Is that a new hat? It's very."

According to Annabelle Goodman: "Yes, doctor, the discomfort beneath the navel does radiate ventrally, with a slight shift from left to right away from the gastric obstru—"

According to Benjamin Tasslewhite: "The light. It shimmers so beautifully. Look! Look! The arms of my Redeemer are open and beck—!"

According to Rev. George M. Plint: "Satan, I come to you now, the bargain fulfilled."

According to Chris Plint: "You are all so precious to me. Every last one of you. Not her, though. Or him. Sorry. I thought you were someone else. Nearly everyone. So precious. Such a treasure to a dying—"

According to Travis Gourd: "I had no movement today or the day before. Or even the day before that. No, wait, I had a movement on Wednesday. Yes, I do recall it, although it wasn't a totally successful evac—"

According to Corley Madison: "Don't talk to me. Talk to the puppet."

According to Richard Threadweaver: "And as to my burial clothes, I should like to be interred in an omnibus conductor's uniform of my own stitching."

According to Letta Hinkle, née Humbree: "Don't push. There are figs enough for everyone." (18-19)

It is difficult to imagine how Plint's dying words could be misheard or misinterpreted in so many different ways, and the implication is that his words effectively function as a kind of Rorschach test that reveals more about the individual witnesses than it does about Plint himself. Other examples of contradictory historical accounts or alternate variants include a dispute over the cause of a fire that burns the family farmhouse (25), a disagreement about the reasons why Blashette missed his graduation ceremony (78), and a debate concerning the identity of the mysterious benefactor who invests in Blashette's company (121). These unresolved questions thus represent gaps or fissures in the text, much like the anomalies in the chronology of Hamilton's biography, and they repeatedly emphasize the fact that the work itself is a product of individual acts of interpretation rather than an authoritative account of what actually happened.

Ballard, Fournel, and Dunn have all written texts that consist solely of paratextual elements that refer to a lost, suppressed, or possibly non-existent work. In each of these examples, the absence of an urtext appears to demand editorial interventions that seek to reestablish a coherent narrative from the textual fragments left behind, yet these interventions always seem to fail, as they simply reveal the existence of many different versions of the work, none of which appear to be more reliable than the others. Instead of guiding and controlling the reader's interpretations, these editorial interventions thus seem to reflect the very process of reading itself, as the readers of these texts are similarly confronted with disorienting and incoherent narratives that resist any attempts to impose order. In other words, the use of paratextual elements in these narratives is not designed to ridicule literary critics by promoting the idea that a literary work should be experienced directly, without any textual mediation; rather, these elements seem to refute the very idea that there can ever be a single, authoritative version of a literary work. These texts thus vividly illustrate the inherent instability of textuality by showing how the meaning of a literary text is always the result of individual acts of reading that emerge from the interaction between the writer, the text, and the reader.

WORKS CITED

- Ballard, J. G. "The Index." *The Complete Short Stories*. London: Flamingo, 2001. 940-945.
- Benchley, Robert C. "Shakespeare Explained: Carrying on the System of Footnotes to a Silly Extreme." *Of All Things*. New York: Henry Holt, 1921. 175-179.
- Dunn, Mark. *Ibid: A Life*. San Francisco: MacAdam/Cage, 2004.
- Dworkin, Craig. "Textual Prostheses." *Comparative Literature* 57.1 (2005): 1-24.
- Finlay, Charles. "Footnotes." *Fantasy and Science Fiction* 101.2 (2001): 85-88.
- Fournel, Paul. "Suburbia." Trans. Harry Mathews. *Oulipo Laboratory: Texts from the Bibliothèque Oulipienne*. London: Atlas, 1995.
- Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Greg, Walter W. "The Rationale of Copy-Text." *Studies in Bibliography* 3 (1950): 19-36.
- Martenson, Jennifer. *Xq28!*. Provincetown: Burning Deck, 2001.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pale Fire*. New York: Lancer Books, 1962.
- Shillingsburg, Peter, *Resisting Texts: Authority and Submission in Constructions of Meaning*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- Wajcman, Gérard. *L'interdit*. Paris: Denoel, 1986.
- Zeller, Hans. "A New Approach to the Critical Constitution of Literary Texts." *Studies in Bibliography* 28 (1975): 231-264.